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Understanding the Sacrifice of Service

By Rep. Stephanie Herseth Sandlin

This Memorial Day we remember and honor those who are deployed all across the globe to preserve and protect our freedom, as well as our veterans and those who have made the ultimate sacrifice.

This nation can never say thank you enough to all of those who served in the military. However, it's hard to know how to adequately thank someone who has faced grave danger on behalf of their country, on behalf of all of us. Those who have never faced such danger can never really know what the brave individuals went through, although we can listen. We can hear their

stories and we can do our best to understand.

Recently, I had the opportunity to greet the most recent South Dakota Honor Flight at the Marine Corps War Memorial. South Dakota Honor Flight brings World War II veterans to our nation's capitol on an all-expenses paid trip to see the monuments erected in their honor. These World War II veterans crossed oceans and climbed mountains. They endured brutal conditions, and determined enemies. Their job was not simple and danger was ever-present in their lives. But these soldiers put aside their fears and worries, focused on their mission, listened to their officers and experienced comrades, and, in the end, prevailed – winning the war and celebrating victory.

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Through talking with and learning from these veterans, I hope that I understand better the power of an entire generation coming together to face down perhaps the greatest threat our globe has ever faced.

Until the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, many in my generation did not know the true sacrifice of war. We have learned it since, not just from the sadness of casualty lists and grieving families, but also have from the clear-eyed soldiers anxious and willing to do their part. As we honor the sacrifices of the 31 sons and daughters with South Dakota ties who have been killed in Iraq and Afghanistan and the over 5,000 sons and daughters of our nation who have perished in these conflicts, I think we all understand a little more about the sacrifices needed to maintain the victories we have won in those countries and our hard-won progress there.

The sacrifices we ask of our men and women in uniform are great. It is a heavy burden, and it takes a special strength of character, and love of country, for each serviceman or woman to take on this challenge. They give up some of their freedom to ensure every generation of Americans can enjoy the freedoms that make our country great. Those of us who represent them owe them more than just words in return for their sacrifices. Ensuring that veterans receive the benefits and services they deserve remains one of my first priorities and duties in Congress. This is a moral promise that must be fulfilled and to me, it is a promise just as meaningful and powerful as the promise of a young life that we send out onto a battlefield a half a world away.

To the servicemembers who gave their lives and to their families, to our veterans, and to our brave servicemen and women serving in uniform today – thank you. May God continue to bless you and bless the United States of America.